DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 148 911 UD 017 518

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TITLE Literature of Southeast Asia.
INSTITUTION ASIA Society, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Factors; Drama; Essays; Fiction; *Literary History; *Literary Influences; *Literary Styles; *Literature; Poetry
IDENTIFIERS *Asia (Southeast); Burma; Cambodia; Indonesia; Malaysia; Philippines; Thailand; Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief description of the literature of Southeast Asia. This area, which embraces the region south of China and east of India, includes the modern nations of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, The Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. The earliest historical influence came from India around the beginnings of the Christian era. At a later period, Buddhism reached mainland Southeast Asia. Its influence was a major source of traditional literature in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. Vietnam, under Chinese rule, was influenced by Chinese and Indian literature. Indonesia and Malaysia were influenced by Islam and its literature. All of the countries, except for Thailand, underwent a colonial experience and each of the countries reflects in its literature and in other aspects of its culture the influence of the colonizing power, including the language of that power. Education in the foreign language was to bring with it an introduction to a foreign literature and this, in turn, was to have considerable impact upon their modern forms of literary expression. One finds, then, all the well-known literary genres of Western literature, the novel, the short story, the play, and the essay. Poetry had been the most popular form of the traditional literature over the centuries but was rigid in form. However, through increased acquaintance with Western poetry, the poets of Southeast Asia broke the bonds of tradition and began to imitate various poetic types. A reading list of books is included. (Author/AM)

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LITERATURE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

by John M. Echols

Of all the literatures of Asia, including the Near East, none perhaps is so little known as those of that part of the world now commonly called Southeast Asia. This area, embracing the region south of China and east of India, comprises the modern nations of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, The Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. It is not surprising, then, that the literatures of Southeast Asia display a considerable diversity of languages, religions and outside influences, all of which reflect the complex history of the region. So far little of this vast literature has been translated into any language.

The earliest historical influence came from India around the beginning of the Christian era, bringing with it early Mahayana Buddhism and the famed Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These two classics of Sanskrit literature left in varying degrees a very strong imprint upon the literature and other art forms of all of Southeast Asia, with the exception of the Christian Philippines. The latter area remained, for the most part, outside the mainstreams of Indic influence. At a later period Theravada, or Southern, Buddhism reached mainland Southeast Asia from Ceylon, bringing with it the Jataka Tales (the approximately 550 Birth Tales of the Buddha). These have been a major source of traditional literature in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. While much of mainland Southeast Asia was under Buddhist influence, Vietnam was experiencing Chinese rule and its concomitant effects. This introduced Chinese and, to a far lesser degree, Indic literature into Vietnam. Islam was introduced into Malaysia and Indonesia from the twelfth century on, and bringing with it the Islamic literature of the Near East and India.

Alongside the imports from South Asia and China, there has always existed, it seems, indigenous folk tales of considerable variety, handed down through oral tradition and only recently put in writing.

From the seventeenth century until World War II all these countries, with the exception of Thailand, have, for longer or shorter periods, undergone a colonial experience, with the result that a variety of Western powers has influenced the area: in Indonesia, the Dutch, in Burma and Malaysia the British, in the Philippines the Spanish and then the Americans, and in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (formerly called Indochina) the French. Each of these countries thus reflects in its literature and in other aspects of its culture the influence of the colonizing power, including the language of that power. The Indonesian learned the Dutch language as his Western language, the Filipino, first Spanish and later English, and so on. Education in the foreign language was to bring with it an introduction to a foreign literature and this, in turn, was to have considerable impact upon their modern forms of literary expression. One finds, the, all the well-known literary genres of Western literature, the novel, the short story, the play and the essay. Poetry had been the most popular form of the traditional literature over the centuries but tended to be quite rigid in

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form. Through increased acquaintance with Western poetry, the poets of Southeast Asia broke the bonds of Tradition and began to imitate the various poetic types, even experimenting with e.e. cummings and other avant-garde poets. The one type of Western literary genre which is still poorly exploited is literary criticism.

Education is an "alien tongue" as NVM Gonzales has spoken of it, brought, in its train, writing in the newly acquired Western language, in some instances to the disadvantage of the national language or local vernacular, but this literature has yet to find its place in world literature.

Burmese Literature

Earlier Burmese literature is characterized by adaptations of the Jataka Tales and, later, through contact with the Siamese court, of the Ramayana (called Ramayagan). In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries drama flourished, but with the coming of the British in the 19th century, the traditional literature waned and many Burmese authors were influenced by Western forms and authors. In the early 20th century several original novels written in Burmese by U Lat, and in the period between the two World Wars a number of widely read works by a leading nationalist, U Nun (better known as Thakin Kodaw Hmaing) appeared. U Thain Pe's Tet Phongyi (The Modern Monk) is one of the better known novels of the period just prior to World War II. It is a severe indictment of the 'new monk' and his failure to adhere to the precepts of the Buddhist order.

In recent years one of the writers who has achieved considerable prestige as an author is U Nu, the well-known political leader. He has written a number of works in Burmese; two plays have been translated into English under the title The People Win Through and The Wages of Sin. Little is known of the current literary scene in Burma.

Cambodian Literature

Cambodian is undoubtedly better known for its architectural monuments than for its literature, primarily because the latter has yet to be examined in the same detail. The major traditional work is the Reamker or story of Rama. Alongside this are the romances which are reflections of the Hindu epic, Buddhism, and Cambodian folk tales. A well-known example of this type is Vorvong and Saurivong in which everything is possible.

Modern Cambodian literature reflects French influence and style, and some writers have introduced new social messages through the medium of legendary stories. The output of such works is so far not great, possibly because the reading audience is small and does not-encourage creative writing. This is a serious problem in most of Southeast Asia.

Indonesian Literature

Indonesian literature, as distinct from Malay, may be said to begin with the first translations and adaptations of Western novels into Malay-based Bahasa Indonesian in the first decade of this century. They were followed closely by such

original but highly imitative novels as Marari Siregar's Azab dan Sengsara (The Miseries of a Young Girl) and Marah Rusli's Siti Nurbaja, both of which had much the same theme: protest against the traditional way of life. In the thirties, with the founding of the literary and cultural journal Pudjangga Baru (The New Writer), represented by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, the brothers Armijn and Sanoesi Pane, and Amir Hamzah, modern Indonesian writing comes of age, influenced both by the West and by the East, especially India.

At the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945 the so-called Generation of '45 emerges, represented by the poets Chairil Anwar and Sitor Situmorang, the short story writer Idrus, the playwrights Usmar Ismail and Utuy Sontani, and the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer whose Keluarga Gerilja (Guerrilla Family) is considered one of the better novels in Indonesian. Another outstanding novelist and short story writer of this period (and he is still writing) is Achiat K. Mihardja with his novel Atheis (The Atheist). Mochtar Lubis, journalist and painter, has several novels and other works to his credit.

A new generation (of'50) is now writing and publishing. Among the promising poets are W.S. Rendra, Toto Sudarto Bachtiar and Ajip Rossidhy. The latter has been quite prolific in Indonesian and in Sundanese. The recent political and economic problems faced by Indonesia have not encouraged creative writing, but literary journals such as Horizon are appearing.

Although literary criticism is not highly developed, the dean in this field is H.B. Jassin, author of a number of anthologies and critical studies.

Malay Literature

Until the beginning of the twentieth century much of the literature of Malaysia and Indonesia (in Malay) was the same. Both shared the various stories such as the Hikayat Seri Rama, derived from the Indian epic, and both enjoyed the Panji tales which originated in Java and passed into Thailand. The later serjarahs or histories, for example, the Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals, were equally familiar to readers on both sides of the water, as were the cycles of tales from Moslem sources, both countries being predominantly Moslem. The Autobiography Hikayat Abdullah of the famed Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir has been widely read in the two areas and his use of a more colloquial style of language had some effect upon his successors in Malaysia and in Indonesia.

Since 1900 Western contact has brought with it new literary forms and these have been widely imitated. Among Malay writers mention should be made of the short story writers Keris Mas (Kamaludin Muhammad) and Usman bin Awang. The latter is also a well-known poet. A. Samad Said and his wife, Salmi Manja, have recently published works which have achieved considerable recognition in Malaysia.

Philippine Literature

Although some fragments of pre-European literature are recorded for the Philippines, most of the extant literature dates from the coming of the Spaniards to the islands in the sixteenth century. The early literature (16th and 17th

centuries) is not prolific, but, beginning with the 18th century, literature is Spanish and Tagalot appears. One of the Filipino classics in the later language is Ferdinant Baltazar's Florante at Laura, often considered an early precursor of the writings of supporters of independence. The story is laid in Albania, but the names and descriptions are Filipino. The novel Banaag at Sikat (Dawn and Light) by Lopez K. Santos is also regarded as a classic in Tagalog.

By the middle of the 19th century the most important writing was in Spanish and the internationally renowned representative of this period is Jose Rizal, whose novels Noli me Tangere (The Lost Eden) and El Filibusterismo (The Subversive) helped to spark the struggle for independence from Spain. A man of many talents, his works were ultimately to help bring about his execution before a Spanish firing squad in Manila. Writing in Spanish has not reached such heights since, although a modest amount is published today among and for the elite.

With the coming of the Americans around the turn of this century, English language and literature were introduced into the school system. As a result, there has been a substantial output of Philippine writings in English. Writers such as NVM Gonzalez with his novel The Bamboo Dancers, Nick Joaquin's novel, The Woman Who Had Two Navels and the play Portrait of the Artist as Young Man, and Bienvenido Santos' You Wonderful People are known beyond the borders of their country. Leonard Casper's endeavors as critic and anthologist are spreading a deeper knowledge and appreciation of Philippine literature in English outside the Philippines.

Thai Literature

The traditional literature of Thailand is represented by folk tales and by the Thai version of the Ramayana called Ramakien which has replaced the Indian names and places by native Thai names. Other famous stories are Khun Chang Khun Phaeng and the 15th century Phra Law, called in English Magic Lotus. The Thai court was not only the patron of the arts; the kings regularly participated in the writing groups. A well-known writer and court favorite of the late 18th century, Sunthorn Bhu, wrote Phra Abhai Mani which is still popular to this day. Bhu belonged to one of the royal writing groups

With the coming of the West and the subsequent modernization of Thailand in the 19th century by Kings Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn, many Western novels were translated or adapted for the Thai reader.

One of the more popular of the serious contemporary writers of today is Kukrit Pramoj whose Phaidaeng (Red Bamboo) has been translated into English and published in Bangkok. It is an account of the conflict between Buddhism and Communism centered around a Buddhist temple (wat) in a Thai village. Dok Mai Sod, Manas Chanyong, and Dhep Maha-paorya are Thai short story writers who are widely read and highly regarded by the Thai reader.

Vietnamese Literature

Chinese literature early exhibited a profound influence upon Vietnamese literature, due to some hundreds of years of cultural domination from the north. From this evolved in the 13th century a form of writing derived from Chinese script

and called chu-nom which gradually became an instrument for the expression of national culture. During the next five centuries Vietnamese literature, especially poetry, flourished and by the end of the 18th century appeared the national poem of Vietnam, a novel in verse entitled Kim-Van-Kieu by Vietnam's greatest poet Nguyen-Du. It is the story of the beautiful Thuy Kieu who falls in love with a handsome poet, Kim Trong. Betrothed, they plan to be married when Kim Trong must leave home for a time. Suddenly misfortune strikes, and Thuy Kieu's father is thrown into prison. In order to help her father and save the family honor, Thuy Kieu agrees to marry an unknown admirer who will provide the funds needed to release her father. She soon discovers that the man she has married has done so for the purpose of placing her in a brothel. In 3,000 verses the poet movingly depicts Thy Kieu's plight.

Another masterpiece of Vietnamese literature of the 18th century is Chinh-phu-Ngam (Lament of a Warrior's Wife), originally composed in Sino-Vietnamese by Dang-tran-Con about 1741. The Vietnamese version was done by Phan-huy-Ich, according to recent scholarship. This poem relates the lament of a young wife who waits in vain for the return of her husband from war. Contemporary with the Lament of A Warrior's Wife is On-nhu-Hau's Cung Oan Ngam Khuc (Plaint of an Abandoned Queen), a poem extremely popular with Vietnamese women of all ages. It relates the sad story of a queen of ancient times who, for various reasons, is ignored and abandoned by her king to the solitude of her apartment.

From the late 19th century the literature of Vietnam begins to reflect the impact of the West on many aspects of its culture. With the widespread use of quoc-ngu (Romanized Vietnamese), translations of French writing proliferated. Several important literary and cultural journals appear on the scene and make their influence felt. Western literary genres are introduced and the traditional, rigid poetic forms are relaxed. Original writing begins with the appearance on Hoang-Ngoc-Phach's highly sentimental novel To-Tam (1925). This novel depicts the generational conflict regarding the new customs. It spawned a horde of imitators whose novels depicted unrelieved despair ending in tragedy. This romantic school was followed in the thirties by a group of realists, headed by the very popular novelists Nhat Linh, author of Doan-Tuyet (Rupture) and Khai-Hung, author of Hom Buom Mo Tien (The Butterfly's Fairy Dream). Another favorite among Vietnamese but frowned upon by the French was Nguyen-Cong-Hoan whose Buoc Duong Cung (Impasse) was banned in prewar Vietnam but has recently been translated and published in Hanoi. Novels and short stories abound and the poets The-Lu, and Han-mac-Tu, the leper, enthrall the Vietnamese with the haunting charm of their poetry. A current poet who has enjoyed some popularity is Vu-hoang-Chuong.

All books listed are paperbacks unless otherwise noted.

LITERATURE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

For Historical Reference:

The World of Southeast Asia: Selected Historical Readings. Benda. Harper $6.40.

Burma

Burmese Drama. A study with translations of Burmese plays. U. Htin Aung. Oxford $4.25 Cloth.

Burmese Monk's Tales. Collected, translated and introduced by Maung Htin Aung. Columbia $7.50 Cloth.

We the Burmese. Helen G. Trager, ed. Praeger $6.95 Cloth. Sampling of Burmese writing about Burma, including selections from the literature.

Indonesia

On Thrones of Gold, Three Javanese Shadow Plays. James R. Brandon. Harvard $15.00 Cloth.

*Letters of a Javanese Princess. Raden Adjeng Kartini. Tr. from the Dutch by Agnes Louise Symmers. Ed. with introduction by Hildred Geertz. Preface by Eleanor Roosevelt. W.W. Norton $1.95.

Twilight in Djakarta. Mochtar Lubis. Tr. by Claire Holt. Vanguard $4.50 Cloth.

*Anthology of Modern Indonesian Poetry. Burton Raffel, ed. State University of New York Press $1.45.

The Complete Poetry and Prose of Chairil Anwar. Burton Raffel, ed. and tr. State University of New York Press $2.45.

The Development of Modern Indonesian Poetry. Burton Raffel. State University of New York Press. $7.00 Cloth.

Malaysia

Modern Malay Verse, 1946-61. Oliver Rice and Abdullah Majid, ed. Oxford $1.40.

Philippines

New Writing from the Philippines; a critique and anthology. Syracuse University Press. $7.95 Cloth. Also contains comprehensive bibliography of Philippines literature.

*Jose Y. Alonso Rizal: The Lost Eden (Noli me tangere). W.W. Norton $2.45.
The Subversive (El Filibusterismo). W.W. Norton $1.95.

N.V.M. Gonzales: The Bamboo Dancers. Swallow $3.95. Cloth.
Selected Stories. Swallow $2.75 Cloth.

Thailand

Sang Thong. Dance drama from Thailand's Classical Theater. Fern S. Ingersoll, tr. Tuttle $6.00 Cloth.

Tales from Thailand. Martin Davies Toth. Tuttle $7.15 Cloth.

Vietnam

Vietnamese Legends. George F. Schultz. Tuttle $4.70 Cloth

We the Vietnamese. Praeger $2.95.

*A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry. Translated by Nguyen Ngoc Bich with Burton Raffel & W.S. Merwin, Knopf, 1975, $4.95, Paperback.

*Books or authors most highly recommended if time and budget are limited.